

UNDER DEVELOPMENT

No laughing matter

Ignorance may be bliss, but his customers' stupidity has left David Robinson with a lack of comic material this month. Still, at least he's not too old to vent his spleen

I'm in a miserable mood. It's not the fact that I've had another birthday, which takes me ever closer to the dreaded 60th. Sixty is the new 40; that's what I keep telling myself. If I say it often enough, I might believe it. No, the cause is (as ever) the custards, who this month have been more 'tard' than 'cust'. I don't know what's the matter with them but, sadly, they've stopped doing funny things.

"So the years of lecturing have finally paid off?" I hear you ask. Well, no. They're still doing stupid things and asking stupid questions. They've just stopped being funny. I've relied on them month after month, year after year, and they've finally let me down – big time.

Mrs R has spent several days talking to a subsidiary of a large quoted company. Because it has its own group IT department, it's willing to pay only for telephone support; the tricky stuff is meant to be handled by its expensive staff. Recently they managed to blow up the data on their Sage accounting system. Such events are rare and normally caused by the power going off in the middle of a posting update. The recommended fix is to revert to the last good backup copy of the data, which users hate because it means redoing all the entries made since that was taken. In a big company, even one day can mean a lot of entries.

Sage provides a kind of data validation routine that goes through all the records and tries its best to fix any problems, such as the sum of all the outstanding invoices not matching the total balance on a specific account. As the client's staff didn't want to redo the work, Mrs R talked them through starting the validation, giving clear instructions that no-one should make any new entries while the routine was running and warning that it would take considerable time to complete.

FLICKING THE SWITCH

The following day they rang again. No-one could get into the accounting system. Checking the data files with some of her 'home brew' diagnostics, Mrs R concluded that the computer had been



switched off roughly half-way through the validation, a conclusion borne out by inspecting the system event log. It turned out one of the IT department had seen the computer still switched on after 'going home time' and turned it off without checking what it was doing. "Didn't think it mattered," was his response. Some IT expert.

As they wouldn't pay for a callout, the IT department emailed the data to us in an 8GB Zip file, which even at broadband speeds takes a while to transmit. Mrs R found and patched the bad records caused by the early shutdown, did a data validation routine for them, sent the data back again, and the staff set about making more entries.

The next day, they called again. Entries made the day before were missing. Moreover, the account records were corrupt again and out of balance. The client's staff were incensed and said sarkily that they thought we'd fixed the corruption. More investigations revealed the data files we'd sent back weren't the ones there now. Eventually, the IT department confessed that they had thought it best to restore the data from the last backup. Which was from two days before we'd done the repair. We were back to square one.

MISERY LOVES COMPANY

There are plenty of other examples in the same vein that I could bore you with but won't. Stupid? Yes.

Funny? No. With material like this to work with, I'm hardly going to have the writers of *Little Britain* quaking in their boots, am I?

To add to the misery, there are the cost pressures. Every client I've seen lately has gone to great pains to point out how their customers, especially those who supply supermarkets, are putting unbearable pressure on them to cut prices, which affects their ability to pay us so much. One had a new £60K BMW sitting in the car park and another hires a helicopter every time he has to travel more than 50 miles. I had to endure three hours on the M25 the last time I visited him. Life can be tough.

This downward pressure on price is intensifying. There are three main factors involved:

1. Feature saturation
2. Hardware values
3. The internet

Feature saturation is a relatively recent phenomenon. For years, software kept on getting bigger and better, sometimes faster (where the operating system allowed) and ever capable of doing more and more things. But we've arrived at a point where most of the worthwhile problems have been addressed and the law of diminishing returns is setting in fast. Take accounting software. We have several clients still running the DOS version of Sage Line 100. It still issues invoices.

It still does the VAT and tells them how much customers owe and how much profit they have made. And can we get them to upgrade? Not until pigs fly.

Then there's the price of hardware. For everyday business use, you can get a perfectly usable computer for around £400. In the long-lost days when a PC cost a couple of thousand quid, spending the same on software didn't seem too onerous. But many bosses don't understand that software isn't subject to the same economic forces and, if anything, costs more to create now than 10 years ago.

Then there's the internet. Ripped-off copies of software from newsgroups don't seem as common as they used to be, but there's a lot of freeware, shareware and give-awayware about, all of which affects the perception of what a software package is worth. Does it do what's required? Who cares?

TURBO-CHARGED

As a counter-measure, Keef and I have put a lot of effort into developing 'super-hero components' designed to boost productivity and carve holes in the time it takes to get a project into users' hands. The proof of the pudding came last week when we wrote a sales invoicing program in Turbo Delphi using just three lines of handwritten code.

What we need to develop next is a super-stupid component. This would be used when a custard gives you a requirement like this:

"When we started using Sage Line 50, if we made a mistake on a sales invoice we had to prepare a credit note to correct the mistake or issue a new invoice. In our old manual system, we Tipp-Exed over the numbers and wrote over the top in ballpoint pen. Can you make our new system do something similar?"

Perhaps the answer is to tell him to use the Tipp-Ex to amend the onscreen preview, then sell him a new monitor every month. ☹

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